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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON



July 29, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: Evaluation of the Quality of U. S. Intelligence
Bearing on the TET Offensive, January 1968.

The President has approved the recommendation made in the enclosed report on the subject submitted by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board under date of June 7, 1968, calling for a study to be made in consultation with the heads of the intelligence agencies concerned.

It would be appreciated if you would submit an initial report to this office and to the President's Board by September 15, 1968, on the results of the desired study.

Bromley Smith

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Enclosure.

CC: The Chairman,
President's Foreign
Intelligence Advisory Board.

NSC/PFIAB Review Completed.

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PRESIDENT'S FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY BOARD

June 7, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Evaluation of the Quality of U.S. Intelligence
Bearing on the TET Offensive, January 1968

Background

1. In my memorandum dated February 23, 1968 you were informed that your Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board was looking into the "intelligence failure" which allegedly occurred at the time of the attacks on South Vietnamese cities during the TET holiday last January. It was our purpose to determine insofar as possible (a) whether adequate intelligence indicators had been available to serve as warnings prior to the attacks; (b) whether these warnings reached the proper officials in time; and (c) what lessons bearing on intelligence might be learned from the experience. We did not undertake to pass judgment on the adequacy or appropriateness of the subsequent actions taken by commanders and key officials who received the intelligence.

2. The Board consulted with and received briefings from representatives of the principal United States departments and agencies having responsibilities for intelligence relating to the Vietnam theater. Also, the Board made requests for additional information concerning specific aspects of the subject. These requests led to a post-mortem study by the United States intelligence community, in collaboration with appropriate military authorities, which concentrated on the intelligence bearing on the enemy build-up during the 15 days preceding the TET offensive. This study was conducted by a working group composed of representatives of the Central Intelligence Agency (acting as Chairman), the Department of State, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the Joint Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The working group visited South Vietnam in March where it was joined by observers from CINCPAC and MAVC and, with the latter, received briefings and reviewed numerous relevant documents. The group's inquiries also included interviews with Ambassador Bunker, General Westmoreland, United States military commanders and intelligence officers. On the South Vietnamese side, there were interviews with the commanding generals of I and II Corps, the J-2 of the Joint General Staff and his deputy, and the deputy director of the National Police.

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3. Basing its assessment on the findings of these representatives of the intelligence community and on a sampling of the vast quantity of information received concerning the enemy during the pre-TET period, the Board submits the following views regarding the intelligence aspects of the TET offensive.

Findings

4. Throughout January, 1968 the intelligence apparatus was filled with indications that the enemy was preparing for a series of coordinated attacks on a larger scale than ever before attempted. Considering each Corps area separately, the clearest advance warnings directed attention to the likelihood of enemy attacks in I Corps, the Kontum-Pleiku areas of II Corps, and the vicinity of Saigon in III Corps. In IV Corps, the U.S. intelligence apparatus received virtually no advance indications of the nature and extent of the attacks which occurred. With regard to the timing of the enemy's offensive, most of the intelligence evaluators concluded that the offensive most likely would occur just prior to or immediately following the TET holiday period which extended from January 27 to February 3, 1968. A few of the evaluators in the field, including General Westmoreland, included in their estimates the specific possibility that the offensive might take place during the TET holidays. While some reports suggested the possibility of simultaneous attacks in certain areas the Board found none predicting the extent of the attacks which actually occurred or the degree of simultaneity achieved in their execution.

5. In the intelligence available in the pre-TET period, many of the cities, towns and installations actually attacked were mentioned as possible targets. The Board finds little in the pre-TET intelligence suggesting that the country-wide attacks might concentrate on the cities and towns to the virtual exclusion of frontier targets or that the enemy might seek to establish lodgments in these urban areas and foment uprisings. The expectation seems to have been that the harassment of the cities and towns would be confined largely to mortar and rocket attacks, rather than the ground attacks which actually took place.

6. In the Vietnam theater the evaluation of the pre-TET intelligence indicators prompted cancellation of the TET truce in I Corps on January 25 and contributed to General Westmoreland's actions on January 30 in putting U.S. commanders on full alert throughout all of South Vietnam just prior to the main attacks. Although the pre-TET intelligence did not include precise warning as to the time and place of each major attack which was mounted it did serve as a general alert to field commanders without indicating the exact what, where, when, and how of the impending attacks. Significantly, however, the Board found no case in

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which United States forces appeared to have suffered defeat in this period because of a lack of timely intelligence. The Board does not have sufficient information to formulate a similar judgment with regard to the forces of our allies.

7. The Board notes the views expressed in the post-mortem study by the U.S. intelligence community (referred to in paragraph 2 above) that:

"The urgency felt in Saigon was not fully felt in Washington in the immediate pre-attack period. As a result, finished intelligence disseminated in Washington did not contain the atmosphere of crisis present in Saigon. We do not believe that this represents a failure on anyone's part. The information available was transmitted and duly analyzed, but atmosphere is not readily passed over a teletype circuit. Although senior officials in Washington received warnings in the period 25-30 January, they did not receive the full sense of immediacy and intensity which was present in Saigon. On the other hand, with Saigon alerted, virtually nothing further could be done in Washington that late in the game which could affect the outcome."

25X1 The Board agrees with much of this frank and revealing statement, particularly the view that many Washington intelligence reports failed to convey the same sense of urgency as existed in Vietnam. To cite two examples, the daily CIA document "The Situation in Vietnam" throughout January was filled with reports of possible enemy offensive actions but it was not until January 28 that the warning became loud and clear that a wide-spread coordinated series of attacks might be expected in the near future.

8. The Board does not agree that this difference of tone in intelligence reporting in Washington is beyond criticism. Several factors probably contributed to this difference: (a) the appearance of intelligence indicators against a background clutter of conflicting or confusing reports which dulled to some extent the sharpness of the warnings conveyed; (b) the difficulty of framing synthesized reports accurately portraying a distant situation; (c) the effect

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of the reworking of reports in intermediate intelligence agencies between the field and the senior Washington officials; and (d) the difficulty at the Washington level of sorting out and properly emphasizing the important in the mass of intelligence flowing to Washington from the field.

9. The processing of intelligence reports may not only bleach their color but may also delay the arrival of the product at destination to the extent that decision-makers will not wait for it. The Board is under the impression that senior officials, faced with urgent requirements to make prompt decisions, are often unable to wait for processed intelligence and not infrequently fall back on raw intelligence reports brought to their attention through the initiative of personal staff assistants not a part of the official intelligence organization. While resort to this kind of improvised intelligence support is understandable, the extent of its use by senior officials raises serious questions as to the timeliness as well as to the value of the intelligence contained in the routine publications of the intelligence community.

10. The intelligence assessments of this episode made by the majority of officials concerned provide an example of the difficulty of anticipating the unusual, even when intelligence indicators point in unusual directions. In spite of some intelligence indicators that a wide-spread offensive might be launched against key centers during the TET holidays, past experience led most United States and Government of Vietnam officials to expect the attacks before or after (not during) the holidays. Because the enemy had never in the past launched large-scale simultaneous attacks, most officials were surprised by the large number of attacks which were mounted, by their timing, by their simultaneity, and by their generally good coordination.

Conclusions

11. Based on its review, the Board concludes:

a. that the intelligence at hand contributed to the decision on January 25 to cancel the TET truce in I Corps and to General Westmoreland's action on January 30 putting U.S. commanders on full alert throughout all of South Vietnam just prior to the main attacks;

b. that intelligence contributed substantially to the result that the attacks on the cities were beaten off and that no permanent lodgements were achieved;

c. that the intelligence bearing on the TET offensive proved adequate in that it alerted U.S. commanders in time to permit

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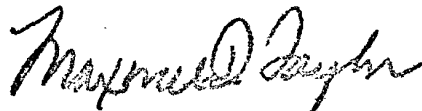
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them to carry out their missions successfully and, therefore, there are no grounds to support the charge of a major intelligence failure;

d. that the finished intelligence assessments and reporting at the Washington level did not convey the same sense of urgency of the developing military situation as those reaching decision-makers in Saigon and often arrived too late to satisfy the demands of senior officials for prompt information.

Recommendation

A Your Board is increasingly concerned that the normal intelligence process in critical circumstances is neither timely nor adequate. Further, there is a concern that the reliance upon sources other than that process will continuously weaken its effectiveness. Therefore your Board recommends a careful study by the Director of Central Intelligence, in consultation with the heads of the several intelligence agencies, to determine whether the normal process can be improved to remedy the defects noted in this report. If not, alternate means should be sought and made a part of the institutional process.



Maxwell D. Taylor
Chairman

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